



# Historic House Research Handbook



*Focus on Local History, Number 1*

**Y**ou're intrigued by an old house and you want to know its story. How can you find out when it was built, who lived there, how it may have changed over time? Maybe your ambition is even broader, and you want to learn about its architectural style and the development of the entire neighborhood.

Historic house research resembles the painstaking, nonviolent aspects of detective work. All you need is patience, perseverance, and time. Luck also helps. The story of a house builds as you follow leads, cross-check facts and track down sources to learn about the owners, architect, and builders. The work will take you to libraries, city and county offices, historical societies, perhaps even on scouting trips to meet descendants of former owners. If your curiosity is deep, or you have a bit of bulldog in your character, you may be able to build a fascinating house biography.

Because counties vary in the organization of records and the availability of materials, the following research suggestions are, of necessity, general. When in doubt, consult experts in local history and ask questions.

## Don't reinvent the wheel

Launch your old-house investigation by finding out if the information you seek has already been compiled. A file may exist in the local history collection of your community's library, county museum or historical society, particularly if your house was built by a prominent family.

If the house is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, it has already been researched as a part of the nomination process. Contact the state's Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology [DHPA] for a listing of Indiana properties in the National Register and to obtain a copy of a property's nomination form.

Check with DHPA or Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana to find out if a survey of your county has been completed for the Indiana Historic Sites and Structures Inventory, a program of DHPA. Funded by grants from DHPA, Historic Landmarks Foundation has surveyed a majority of Indiana's 92 counties. If your county has been surveyed, the local library should have a copy of the survey findings, called an *Interim Report*.

While the *Interim Report* typically includes only basic information on a property, it will provide an approximate date of construction and may also offer helpful historical background. If you find your property in the report, you may wish to request a copy of the original survey form, which contains more information than the skeletal facts included in the *Interim Report*. Make a note of the property's survey number in the *Interim Report* and call DHPA to order a copy of the original form.

If the house is in a locally-designated historic district, the preservation commission may have historical information about the building. To learn if there is a preservation commission or historic review board in your community, call the Historic Landmarks Foundation office in your area.

If a very rough range of construction dates would satisfy your interest, a basic physical examination of the house and a brief study of its architectural style might provide the answer you seek. (See *Bibliography* for helpful books on recognizing architectural styles.) You can generally arrive at a ten- to thirty-year range for the construction date of a house by recognizing the style and checking reference works to determine the period of that style's popularity in the region. If you don't already know the year your house was built, narrowing the window in this manner will save research time in legal documents, city directories and other sources.



Abstract and photo, collection of Joan Hostetler; drawing, Nancy Connor

An abstract—generally a thick sheaf of papers caught with metal fasteners and folded into a thick roll (left)—may be passed from one owner to the next at closing, or you may find one in the house itself or in the collection of a former owner. Luck also plays a part in old-house research: a newspaper article about one woman's search for information about her house resulted in a call from an elderly man who had grown up in the house and had photos he was willing to share.

## Using legal documents

If you want to know more than the architectural style and a rough date, consulting legal documents will allow you to develop the chain of title—a list of owners of the property from the patentee (original purchaser from the U.S. government) to the present. You may be fortunate to find an abstract for your house. If not, you will have to conduct deed research to establish the chain of title.

Although the activity recorded in an abstract, and the information you will find if you pursue deed research, refers to the land rather than the structure, these documents will reveal the names of owners and details that will help in dating your house. Mortgages, probate records, and liens often give concrete facts about the house and lead to other sources of information.

### Abstracts

Most parcels of land have been the subject of a variety of legal transactions over time. An abstract is a summary of all such transactions—deeds, wills, mortgages, tax sales, probate proceedings, litigation—that have affected a particular piece of property. Abstract companies—forerunners to today's title insurance firms—prepared these documents in order to certify that sellers held clear and valid title before a sale.

An abstract generally contains the date and names of people or business entities involved in each property transaction, type of transaction, and reference numbers for the original record (the estate docket number, for example, in a probate court case, or the warranty deed record and page number entered at the time of a sale). You may be fortunate enough to locate an abstract in the house itself—don't forget to look in cupboards and attic and basement rafters, in the collections of

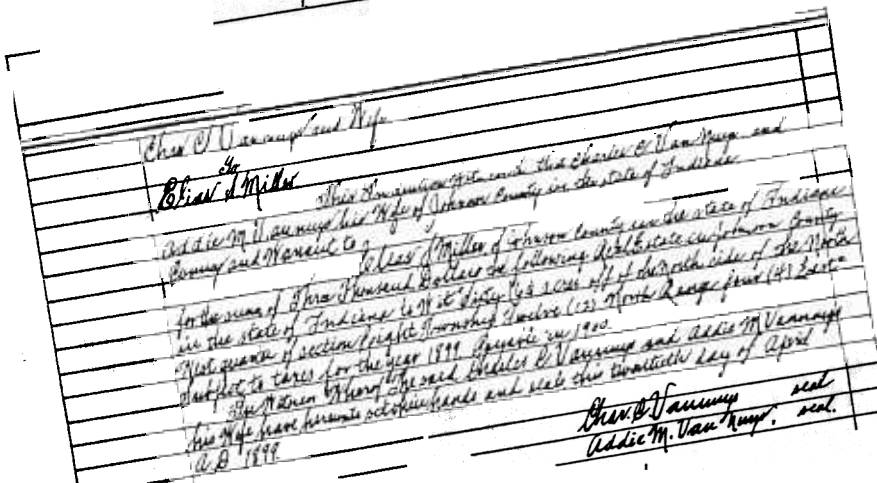
previous owners, or in the possession of the mortgage holder. If you have an abstract it is not necessary to conduct deed research.

The transactions detailed in an abstract refer to land rather than structures, so it is not likely the abstract will tell you the date of your home's construction and the architect's name. Instead, you will have to interpret, infer, follow leads offered by the abstract to other sources, and cross-check in order to zero in on such facts. For example, a leap in the value of a property between consecutive sales might suggest a capital improvement, such as the construction of a house, on the property. This is by no means a foolproof assumption—inflation or reassessment could have caused the increase—but you can confirm it using building permit and sewer connection records, town council proceedings, newspaper articles and other sources.

### Deed Research

If you are unable to locate an abstract, deed research will allow you to build the chain of title. To begin tracing the chain, you'll need the legal description of the property and the name of the current owner. The legal description is different from the mailing address and includes references to a section, township, and range. In the case of urban properties, the legal description usually also includes a subdivision name and lot number.

For example, the legal description for the Kemper House in Indianapolis is Roache's First Addition, 53' 8" North Side Lot 5. The legal description for the Huddleston Farmhouse Inn Museum in Mt. Auburn, a rural property, is the northeast quarter of Section 28 in Township 16 North Range 12 East, abbreviated as Pt NE¼ S28 T16N R12E. If you don't know the legal description and current owner's name, contact the county or township assessor's office.



Deed research may be time-consuming, but it can yield a wealth of information. Transfer books in public offices will refer you to deeds, probate records, and other documents. Early warranty deeds, like a copy of the 1899 deed to the Van Nuys Farm in Johnson County (left), are generally in challenging nineteenth-century legal language and handwriting. The number "325" in the upper right corner is the page number in the deed book where the document is filed.

Armed with the legal description and name of the current owner, you can begin the process of deed research in the county recorder's office. To save valuable time and frustration, find a helpful staff member or someone in your county who has conducted such research and can offer directions, introductions, guidance, and short cuts on the process. (See *Where to go for help.*)

Although counties vary in the organization and availability of records, the following **process** is common in deed research. To build the chain of title or ownership history, you will trace backward in time beginning with the current owner, using transfer books in the recorder's office (or clerk's office, assessor's office, transfer department, or various other names the office may carry, depending upon the county).

Deeds—the proof of property ownership—are indexed by grantee (the recipient of the property or buyer) and grantor (disposer of property or seller) in transfer books. Look for the current owner's name in the most recent index; he or she will be listed as a grantee. (You will note that the alphabetical order in these books may be loose.) The grantor's name will also be listed, along with the amount of the transaction and reference number to the page and book where you will find the deed. As you proceed, be sure to keep complete notes on each transaction, source and reference number.

Repeat the process using the previous owner's name. Remember, the *grantor* of the deed you are looking up is the *grantee* in the preceeding sale. If you do not know when transactions occurred, check grantor-grantee indexes for every year.

Once you've constructed the chain of title, use the reference numbers to look up the actual deeds and copy any pertinent information you find there. In each case, check to verify that the legal description refers to the property you are researching,

since many people have owned and sold several lots in their lifetimes. Transaction amounts shown on deeds, as in an abstract, may offer clues to construction; a large increase in property value may indicate the building of a house or an addition.

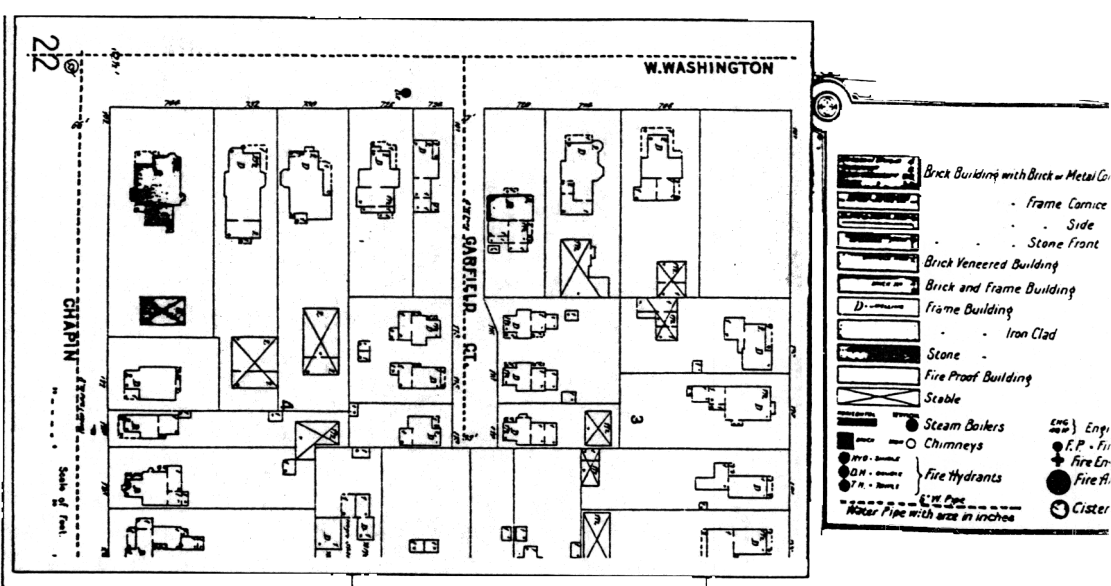
In addition to property owners' names and amounts of sale or consideration, the deed may provide birth, marriage, divorce or death dates of owners and associated individuals and, in some cases, lists of household contents or other tangible assets, and information about buildings on the property. Deeds will also record restrictive covenants and easements.

Watch in the grantor-grantee indexes for special deeds such as mortgages and references to court records, mechanics liens, and other encumbrances such as leases and tax delinquencies, all of which may be filed separately from warranty deeds. Since a mortgage is an owner's means of raising money, it may signal a construction project—the building of a new house or a remodeling.

Mechanics liens—claims filed by construction contractors for unpaid bills—may also be filed separately from the deeds. Since they indicate building activity, these records are worth tracing; they may describe the construction project, and even detail materials and products, in addition to listing the names of builders or craftsmen and the amount of the claim. Court records referred to in the grantor-grantee index are also significant sources of house information. Lawsuits, wills and probate proceedings, and divorce and insanity cases may contain relevant descriptions of the house and its contents.

Although their availability varies greatly from county to county and city to city, tax records and building permits are public documents which may yield information of interest. Check with the assessor and permit agency in your county to find out about access to these records.





## Using historical documents

Libraries and historical societies at the local, county and state levels are fertile sources for historic house research. City directories, old newspapers, fire insurance maps, volumes of biographical sketches, corporate and club histories, photographs, and memoirs, can put flesh on the skeleton developed through deed research.

### City Directories

City directories are an easy source to consult for the names of a home's occupants (as opposed to owners), as well as an approximate construction date. The directories typically also give the principal resident's occupation. Published for cities of various sizes, the directories were inaugurated in some towns as early as 1855.

Beginning with the most recent edition and working backward, find your address and record the name of the occupant in each year's directory until you reach editions in which your address does not yet appear. You'll be able to follow this process through 1914, the year city directories in Indiana began indexing by both address and resident name. Before 1914, however, the directories were indexed only by resident name. If you don't know the names, research in pre-1914 directories becomes a tedious hunt down column after column of names as you search for your address.

Be aware that street names and numbering systems may have changed; in Indianapolis, for example, addresses changed in 1887, 1899 and 1916. Keep in mind, too, that directories do not provide up-to-the-minute data; their publication schedules often create a one- to two-year lag in information. For example, if your address does not appear in directories until 1921, the house might have been built between 1918 and 1921.

Be cautious if a structure is continuously listed at your address from a much earlier date than your home's probable construction date. In such a case, consider the possibility that an earlier structure on the site was demolished or otherwise lost, making way for the building of your house.

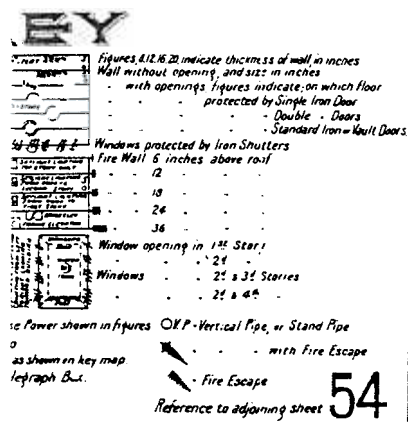
Directories frequently contain spelling and other mistakes, so confirm your research with other sources. You generally can find city directories in the local library, or in the Indiana Division of the Indiana State Library.

### Insurance maps and atlases

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, publishing companies began issuing maps and atlases of American cities and towns to assist the fire insurance underwriting industry in establishing rates. The Sanborn Map Company of New York grew to dominate the field. Depicting building outlines and color-coded to indicate materials, the periodically-updated maps and atlases served the underwriting industry until after World War II.

Sanborn maps representing the period from about 1883 to 1955 are generally available for Indiana cities. By comparing maps produced over a series of years, you may note alterations in your house and outbuildings, new construction, and neighborhood development. Baist Atlases, also produced for fire insurance purposes, include similar maps drawn on a smaller scale.

Consider consulting both of these sources if they are available for your town. Your local library may have a collection of insurance maps. If not, check with the Indiana Division of the Indiana State Library, which maintains a collection of Sanborn maps as well as a listing of other repositories in the state. The Indiana Historical Society also has a collection of insurance maps.



Because they were issued periodically and can be compared, fire insurance maps can assist you in dating a building and may also help date alterations. As a detail and key from an 1899 Sanborn map of South Bend (left) shows, the color-coded Sanborn maps were drawn on a larger scale and are more detailed than Baist maps (detail right from 1908 Baist map showing North Meridian Street in Indianapolis).



## Bird's eye views and county atlases

Bird's eye views, aptly named maps drawn from aerial perspectives, were popular in the nineteenth century for large and small communities. Although neither as common nor as frequently issued as fire insurance maps, bird's eye views are valuable for their scope and detail. They show buildings and outbuildings in three-dimensional perspective and offer valuable evidence of building relationships and major landscape features such as orchards and wooded areas.

In his authoritative reference work *Views and Viewmakers of Urban America* (University of Missouri Press, 1984), noted expert John Reps has documented bird's eye views of the following Indiana communities: Anderson, Attica, Auburn, Cambridge City, Columbus, Crawfordsville, Delphi, Elkhart, Evansville, Fort Wayne, Frankfort, Greencastle, Greensburg, Indianapolis, Kokomo, LaPorte, Lafayette, Logansport, Madison, Michigan City, Mishawaka, Muncie, New Albany, New Castle, New Harmony, Peru, Richmond, Seymour, Shelbyville, South Bend, and Terre Haute. Some of these bird's eye views are in the collection of the Library of Congress, while others may be found in the collections of local libraries and historical societies or the Indiana State Library.

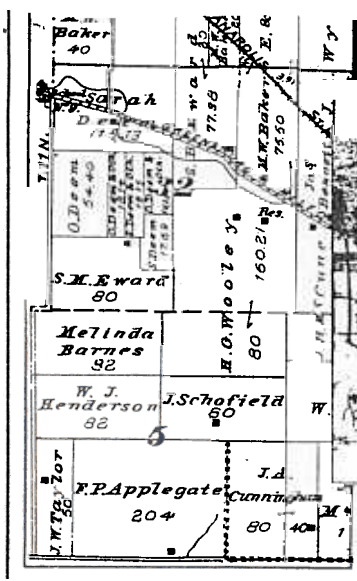
County atlases from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries are another valuable source in historic house research, particularly if your home is in a rural area. These atlases contain maps of the county's townships drawn to indicate land ownership and usually showing the position of residences on the lots, along with the name of each parcel's current owner and the amount of his or her acreage. Maps of the county's larger cities may be included, but they do not usually provide the names of property owners. Most of the atlases contain renderings of prominent farmsteads, sometimes inset with portraits of the owners. If the

subject of your research is a farmhouse, an atlas may provide an owner's name, help you narrow down the construction date, show if the house has been moved—not an uncommon occurrence in rural areas—and perhaps even what it looked like.

Many of these oversized publications also offer histories of the county, the townships, major local institutions and professions, along with biographical sketches of citizens and business directories. The atlases were, in general, published in the 1870s and 1880s; in some cases, an update was produced early in the twentieth century. In recent years, many of these early atlases have been reprinted by historical societies and may be available for purchase. Look for county atlases in your local library or historical society or at the Indiana State Library.

## County histories

You may find information about early owners of your property in a volume of county history. Like atlases, county histories were generally first published in the 1880s, with updates in the early twentieth century. The WPA Writers' Project compiled an index of each county history, a helpful tool if you're looking for references to a specific family. In addition to having a copy of the county history, your local library may have vertical files containing pamphlets, news clippings, and brochures on historic houses. Tell the librarian about your project and ask for help in using the library's resources to the fullest extent in conducting your research.



1882 Atlas of Decatur County, reprinted by The Bookmark, Knightstown, 1976



RESIDENCE OF H. G. WOOLEY, WASHINGTON TOWNSHIP, DECATUR COUNTY, IND.

County atlases are helpful resources for rural house research. In the 1882 *Atlas of Decatur County*, a township map detail shows the H.G. Wooley farm (left), which was also depicted in a rendering. Bird's eye views, like the 1876 perspective of Franklin (right), can expand your knowledge of your property and its surroundings. If your county has been surveyed by Historic Landmarks, the *Interim Report* will be a useful resource.

## Newspapers

Most local libraries maintain copies of historic newspapers; many are on microfilm. If your local library does not have old newspapers, consult the Indiana State Library, whose holdings include approximately 4,000 titles representing 500 communities. Very few of these old newspapers are indexed; however, the time spent in front of a microfilm reader may be worthwhile, particularly if previous research has provided you with specific or general dates.

If you know when an early owner died, for example, you might look for the obituary; nineteenth and early-twentieth century obituaries are often lengthy accounts which offer much more information than today's brief notices. You might search for wedding announcements, which often include detailed descriptions of interior decoration.

If the house belonged to prominent people, or is located in what was originally an affluent neighborhood, the newspaper might have run a long feature article on the home's architecture and decor. In larger cities with daily newspapers, such features might have appeared in a "House and Garden" or "Real Estate" section of the Sunday paper. Such newspaper articles form the basis of *Old Houses in Indiana*, a three-volume work in the Indiana State Library compiled from features written by Agnes McCulloch Hanna between 1929 and 1932 for *The Indianapolis Star*.

## Biographical and other historical resources

Your local library and historical society are also good places to look for biographical information on architects, builders and previous owners. In addition to consulting the previously mentioned county histories for such information, consult biographical indexes for other leads. Ask for help in locating other helpful resources—scrapbooks,

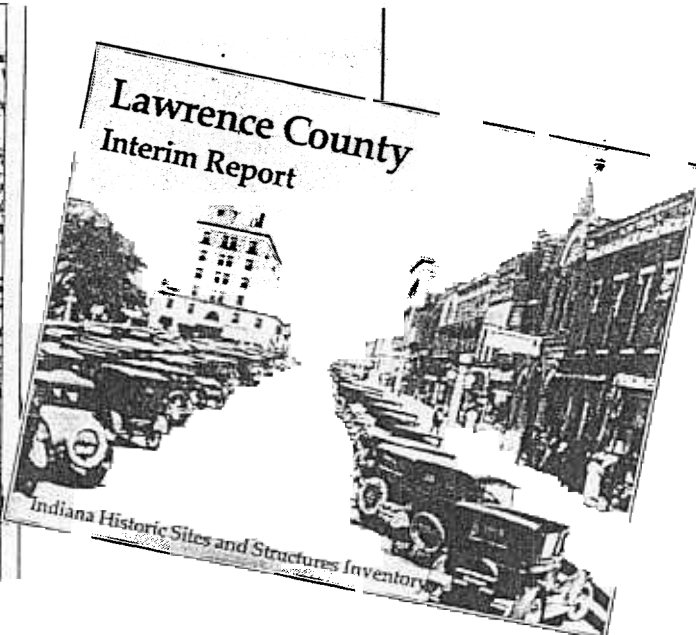
diaries, memoirs, business and professional directories, church and club histories, and uncataloged materials such as clipping files on architecture.

The Biography Index at the Indiana State Library includes statewide references to newspapers, periodicals, Who's Who volumes, and other sources. If you suspect your house was built in the 1920s or '30s you might find the name of the architect or builder in the *The Indiana Construction Recorder*, another valuable resource in the Indiana State Library. The Indiana Historical Society Library also has resources that provide information on prominent citizens, businesses, neighborhoods and other topics.

## Census data

Beginning in 1850, census records include the names and number of people living in a house. In addition to revealing where inhabitants were born, their race, sex, age and marital status, later records sometimes tell their occupations. Your local library or historical society may have census records. If not, you may consult them in the Genealogy Division of the Indiana State Library. The Indiana census records at the State Library are on microfilm and indexed for the following years: 1820, 1830, 1840, 1850, 1860, 1900, 1920; 1880 is partially indexed; and 1870 and 1910 are on microfilm but not indexed. On open shelves in the Genealogy Division's reading room, you will find indexes to many Indiana marriage, birth, and death records, and family histories in the Division's collection may provide information on property and possessions in addition to people.





## Bibliography

For more information on historic architecture and house research, consult the following general references available in the library of Historic Landmarks Foundation:

### Books about architectural styles

Blumenson, John J. G. *Identifying American Architecture: A Pictorial Guide to Styles and Terms: 1600-1945*. 2d ed. Nashville: American Association of State and Local History, 1981.

McAlester, Virginia and Lee. *A Field Guide to American Houses*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.  
National Trust for Historic Preservation. *What Style Is It?* Washington: The Preservation Press, 1977.

Noble, Allen. *Wood, Brick and Stone, The North American Settlement Landscape, Volumes I and II*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984.

Peat, Wilbur D. *Indiana Houses of the Nineteenth Century*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1962.

Rifkind, Carole. *A Field Guide to American Architecture*. New York: New American Library, 1980.

Whiffen, Marcus. *American Architecture Since 1790: A Guide to Styles*. Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1969.

### Books about historic house research

Howard, Hugh. *How Old Is This House?* New York: The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989.

Howe, Barbara J., et al. *Houses and Homes*. Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1987.

Webber, Joan. *How Old is Your House? A Guide to Research*. Chester, CT: The Globe Pequot Press, 1978.

## Where to go for help

### Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana

#### State Headquarters

340 West Michigan Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202  
317-639-4534

#### Regional offices

Indianapolis Office, 317-638-5264

Northern Regional Office (South Bend), 219-232-4534

Southern Regional Office (Jeffersonville), 812-284-4534

Eastern Regional Office (Cambridge City), 317-478-3172

Western Regional Office (Terre Haute), 812-232-4534

Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana saves and restores endangered historic buildings and educates Hoosiers about the architectural heritage of the state. A not-for-profit membership organization, Historic Landmarks Foundation maintains its headquarters on the canal in downtown Indianapolis. The Foundation also acts as an advocate for historic buildings and provides services to Indiana residents from regional offices in South Bend, Jeffersonville, Cambridge City, Terre Haute and Indianapolis.

Historic Landmarks' reference library, located at the state headquarters, contains over 3,000 volumes on architecture and historic preservation. Among the topics covered by the collection are historic house rehabilitation techniques, period paint colors and interior decoration, architectural history and style guides. The library also maintains vertical files and collections of periodicals, slides and audio-visual materials. In general, the Foundation's collection is non-circulating, although the audio-visual materials are available on loan. The library is open to the public; appointments are recommended but not required.



**Division of Historic Preservation & Archaeology**  
 402 West Washington Street  
 IGC South, Room W274, Indianapolis, IN 46204  
 317-232-1646

The Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology [DHPA], a part of the Department of Natural Resources, administers state and federal preservation programs for Indiana. DHPA processes all nominations of Indiana properties to the National Register of Historic Places and sponsors the Indiana Historic Sites and Structures Inventory, a survey program designed to identify properties worthy of preservation.

**Indiana Historical Society**

315 West Ohio Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202  
 317-232-1879

The Indiana Historical Society, a private, nonprofit membership organization, maintains the William Henry Smith Memorial Library. Open to the public, the library's collections fall into four major categories: manuscripts and archives, printed materials, architectural records, and visual materials. The visual materials (predominantly photographs) and architectural records will be of particular interest to those researching the original appearance of historic buildings.

**Indiana State Library**

140 North Senate Avenue, Indianapolis, IN 46204  
 317-232-3675

The Indiana State Library, a state agency, has one of the most comprehensive collections of printed material about Indiana. Materials in its collection include books, pamphlets, maps, manuscripts, newspapers, photographs, city directories, county histories, census records and more. Some of these materials are readily accessible to the

public while others are shelved on closed stacks and must be retrieved by staff for your use. While most of the collection is non-circulating, some materials may be requested through interlibrary loan. Consult your local public or academic library for the appropriate procedure.

**Your local library and historical society**

The local library is an invaluable resource, both for its collections and its professional staff, while the county historical society often forms the locus for networks of people knowledgeable about family and community histories in both rural and urban areas. To find out how to contact your county historian, call the Indiana Historical Society at 317-232-1881; for a list of local historical societies, call 317-232-4591. To learn about local preservation groups and historic review boards in your area, call Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana at any of the offices listed above.

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For information about purchase, please contact the Indiana Historical Bureau, 317-232-2535.

